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S E R M O N,

Preached before the Congregation of

Protestant Dissenters

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MILL-HILL-CHAPEL in LEEDS,

MAY 16, 1773.

By JOSEPH PRIESTLEY, LL.D. F.R.S.

On OCCASION of his resigning his PASTORAL
OFFICE among them.

L O N D O N :

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S. F. R. M. N.

Protestant Dissenters

M. C. Hill-Cox



JOSEPH PRIESTLEY, D.D. F.R.S.

On Occasion of his receiving his D.D.

LONDON
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THE PREFACE.

HAVING been induced to publish the following discourse, by the request of the society to whom it was addressed, and to whom I owe the happiness of some years of my life, I have thought proper to prefix to it a copy of my *letter of resignation*, and of the *answer* to it, though, when they were written, there was far from being any design of making this use of them. This, however, I have done, because I presumed that they would be equally agreeable to the congregation with the sermon itself, as a *memorial of our past intercourse, and mutual esteem*; and also because, if the sermon be calculated to have any good effect, with respect to other ministers or congregations, these pieces must have the same tendency; shewing, more especially, what liberties a candid and generous minded people, who are satisfied of the good intention of their minister, will bear from him, and receive with thankfulness. I own that I had also
a farther

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a farther view, viz. to give a more just idea than the sermon alone could give, of the terms on which I have lived with the congregation at Leeds; which, to serve the base purposes of a party, has been grossly misrepresented, as the account of it has been industriously propagated.

The reason why the letter of resignation contains more than a simple notice of my intention, was that I then had no design of making any other address to the people upon the occasion; and though, by this means, some of the sentiments came to be repeated in the subsequent discourse, they appear to me to be of so much importance, as to bear that repetition.

I call my situation at Leeds a happy one. It has been so on several accounts; but what I have chiefly valued it for is, that, without the most distant apprehension of giving offence to a very great majority of the congregation, I have been at full liberty to *speak, write, or do*, whatever I have judged that the interests of that particular society, or of christianity in general required.

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quired. I do not know many congregations of dissenters in England, so numerous as that of Leeds, where I could have been so happy in this respect; and it is a species of happiness without which I should have had little enjoyment of any situation, how advantageous soever it had been on other accounts.

I shall take the opportunity of this preface to recommend to the serious consideration both of the society at Mill-hill, and of all persons into whose hands this discourse of mine may fall, that excellent sermon of Mr. Graham's, intitled *Repentance the only condition of final acceptance* (which was also preached at Mill-hill chapel) as having the same general tendency with this sermon, and also his *Letters on the doctrine of atonement*. In these pieces the reader will find what I think to be a fair and undisguised account of what is most essential in the religion of the gospel, expressed with a plainness and energy almost peculiar to the author.

To

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*To the congregation of Protestant Dissenters,
at Mill-hill, Leeds.*

My christian brethren,

ALively sense of the happiness I have enjoyed during the continuance of my relation to you, as your pastor, makes it truly painful to me to inform you, that this agreeable relation must soon cease, and that I now give you notice to provide yourselves with a successor to me.

My reason for this step is by no means any sort of dissatisfaction with respect to you. On the contrary there is no situation in life of which I shall ever expect to have more real enjoyment, or which I shall consider as more truly reputable to me. Other prospects, however, have opened to me, by pursuing which I flatter myself that it will be in my power to be more useful both to my family, and the world.

Painful as my separation from you will be, I hope I shall have the satisfaction to leave upon your minds a testimony to the
fidelity

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fidelity with which I have acted as your
 servant, and the servant of our common
 Lord and master Jesus Christ. The purity
 of his gospel, as far as God has enabled me
 to understand it myself, I have, without
fear; but I hope, also, without any great
 or hurtful *imprudence*, endeavoured to ex-
 plain to you; free, I trust, in a great mea-
 sure, from that impure mixture of the doc-
 trines and traditions of men, which, in the
 past ages of darkness and ignorance, had
 greatly debased its spirit, and obstructed
 its effect, and to which the providence of
 God seems to be now, in a more especial
 manner, opening the eyes of the christian
 world; in order, we may hope, to its re-
 covering its original lustre, and thereby
 recommending itself to the universal ac-
 ceptance of Jews and Gentiles.

With respect to this object I have only
 followed the steps of some of my worthy
 predecessors; and it will be your true glory,
 and my happiness, that you make choice
 of a successor to me who will carry on this
 great and necessary work.

As

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As much, however, as I have had this important work at heart, I have been careful to keep the pulpit almost intirely sacred to the still more important business of inculcating just maxims of conduct, and recommending a life and conversation becoming the purity of the gospel. If I or you have failed in this great point, to which all truth is but subservient, it will be my grief, and your aggravated blame; and better had it been for you to have been Papists, or Pagans, than even lukewarm, and much more than profligate professors of genuine christianity.

I undertook the charge of this congregation after having been several years engaged in a very different employment, under many disadvantages, and with great diffidence, and I am sensible of various imperfections with which the performance of my ministerial duty has been attended; but your candour, I have reason to think, has been such, as to think that not ill done, which was well intended. Also, notwithstanding some of the schemes which I formed, and endeavoured to carry into execution,

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cution, have not been attended with all the success that I or you could have wished, I flatter myself that my services and behaviour have, upon the whole, been such, as have produced some good effect, both in making the religion we profess appear more intelligible and amiable, and in enforcing a life and conversation suitable to it.

In this case, even the recollection of our past intercourse will always contribute to answer the same great end; and then, though our relation as *pastor and people* shall cease, that of *fellow christians* will never be dissolved; and we may be looking forward to that more intimate and lasting union which shall take place hereafter, and which shall for ever subsist among the upright and good; when all other relations, and all other things, will appear to be, what they really are, in comparison with this, transitory and insignificant.

With my sincere prayers that the wise providence of God may direct your choice of my successor, and establish you in every
b
thing

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thing that is good and exemplary, I am,
with increased affection,

My christian brethren,

Your servant,

In the gospel of Jesus Christ,

Leeds, Dec.
20th, 1772.

JOSEPH PRIESTLEY.

*The congregation of Protestant Dissenters
at Mill-Hill, to their Pastor,*

The Rev. Dr. Priestley.

Rev. Sir,

YOUR letter, advising your intention
of a resignation of your pastoral
charge over us, to take place in a short
time, has been communicated, and openly
read.

We have been too intimately, and too
happily connected with you, to receive
such a notice with indifference. We know
too

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too well your genuine worth and real merit, to be insensible of the great loss we may sustain by such a change in our congregational and individual connections with you. But at the same time our sincere friendship for you disposes us to rejoice with you in any change that may materially affect the interest of yourself and family, for whose mutual welfare our good wishes will always accompany you.

We should think ourselves wanting to our own feelings, as well as to your deserts, if, on this occasion, and in this public congregational manner, we did not acknowledge to you the very grateful sentiments we feel for all your sincere and faithful services to us as a people; and particularly, as *parents*, to bless you for those affectionate and earnest endeavours which you have steadily pursued, in order to instil knowledge, and inculcate good principles on the minds of our children; and we are desirous to bear our testimony, that as we received you in harmony and peace, so has love and friendship mutually prevailed between us, and we trust will ever prevail.

That

That the *God of peace* may attend and bless you, is the sincere prayer of your ever affectionate friends.

Signed by order of the congregation,

Dear Sir,

Your most obedient servant

and well-wisher,

GEORGE OATES.

Leeds, Mill-hill,

Dec. 27th, 1772.

I PETER

I PETER i. 13.

Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end, for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

My christian brethren,

I DO not think that I can take my leave of you, with whom I have been very happily connected, either with more propriety, or satisfaction, than by recommending to your attention the passage which I have now read to you from the epistle of the apostle Peter ; as it contains a general view of the obligations and hopes of christians, which are necessarily the chief object of attention to every christian minister, and to all christian people.

A

It

It has been my duty, whether I have properly attended to it or not, to explain and confirm to you, and thereby frequently to remind you, of the great principles of christian faith; and it has been your duty to hear the word of exhortation, to give proper attention to the subject, and, being convinced of the truth of christianity, to apply yourselves diligently to the observance of its precepts, in expectation of its glorious rewards; or, in the language of my text (as it may be more properly rendered, or paraphrased) *to gird up the loins of your mind, and, being vigilant, to entertain the most undoubting assurance of the happiness which awaits you at the coming of Jesus Christ.*

Such, my brethren, is the importance of religion (being, in fact, the great business of human life) and such the fascination of the cares of this world, that it behoves us to be continually upon our guard, lest the scenes through which we must necessarily pass draw off our attention from things of infinitely more moment, though more distant; and thus the great end and purpose of

of our being be sacrificed to what is merely accidental or instrumental to it.

It is our consolation, however, that almost all our difficulties in the conduct of life, as it respects futurity, have no other source than want of *attention of mind* to the subject ; for so absolutely inconsiderable are the things of this life, in comparison with that which is to succeed it, that even an imperfect apprehension of the nature of our situation (if, in consequence of being sufficiently impressed and attended to, it be allowed to have its proper influence on our minds) would be sufficient to keep us in the path of our duty ; but without attention and consideration, no motives, however just and weighty, can have any effect.

In reality men miscarry, and miss the great end of their being, only in consequence of acting *precipitately*, and without attending to the necessary consequences of their actions. In other words, it is when they act *irrationally*, like brute beasts, governed by mere appetite and passion ; and when

they act in this manner, is it to be wondered at, that they do not attain the proper happiness of rational and intelligent beings?

It is with great propriety, therefore, that *faith* is represented in the scriptures as the great principle of the christian life, that it was by faith, or in consequence of a firm belief in futurity, depending upon the promise of God, that all the worthies of the Old Testament were enabled to distinguish themselves as they did, and that it is still by faith that we christians are *to overcome the world*.

Now this efficacious faith is not a single *act* or *effort* of the mind, or a simple *conviction* that a future event will take place (for then every man who, if he were interrogated, would answer that he was a christian, would be a good man) but it is such a *full persuasion* of mind, and such a *lively apprehension* of a distant event, as shall give it its just influence, the same that it would have near at hand; and this can only be acquired by frequent attention to it, and meditation upon it.

Could

Could this great end be attained, were truly christian principles and prospects sufficiently impressed on our minds, it would be impossible for us to be guilty of any base or criminal action; and the great motives to the love of God, and of our fellow creatures not being counteracted by any foreign influence, but having their natural and uncontrolled effect upon the mind, we should *love the Lord our God with all our hearts, and our neighbour as ourselves.* And when these governing principles had taken deep root in our minds, they would lead to the practice of the whole of our duty, and, our hearts and affections being engaged, every thing right and good would be easy and pleasant to us.

If these maxims be true, a great deal must be *done* by a man before he can be a christian in the proper sense of the word, that is, *not in name and profession only, but in deed and in truth*; because a *habit* and *temper* is to be formed, which can only be produced by the long continuance of proper actions. A truly christian character is not to be formed but by a course of *dis-*

cipline, and *exercise*, calculated to keep the mind continually impressed with a lively sense of the great truths of christianity; so as to overpower the influence of the objects which surround us, and which are continually solliciting our attention.

If there be any one error in religion more dangerous in its tendency than others, it is the opinion which, in some form or other (and it is capable of endless modifications) has existed almost from the commencement of christianity, viz. that religion properly so called, or that which renders a man acceptable in the sight of God, and fits him for heaven, is not a *habit* or *disposition of mind*, such as I have now mentioned, which evidently requires *time* and *care* to form; but some *single act*, or *effort*, whether proceeding from a man's self, or from God.

If this be the case, the whole may commence and terminate in the shortest space of time, and it may as well take place at the last hour of life, as at any other. Consequently, in the prospect of this, men may
continue

continue to live in sin, secretly flattering themselves with the hope of a late but effectual repentance. But if repentance consist of *a change of disposition and conduct*, it is not even possible that a late, or what we call *a death-bed repentance*, can be an effectual one. For true repentance can only take place in consequence of just views of things, sufficiently impressed upon the mind by careful reflection; and since it is not a *momentary operation*, but a *fixed character* that is wanted, it is, in reality, but very little that can be done at any one particular time.

A man, for instance, may at any time resolve to change his conduct, but that does not amount to an actual change. He may perform any single action; but a single action, though it may *lead to*, does not *constitute* an habit; and even a habit, or course of actions, must be continued a considerable time before it can be quite easy and familiar to him, so that his heart and affections shall be engaged in it; and then only is the *character* properly formed. Again, this character, arising from a fixed attachment

attachment of mind to our duty, admits of *degrees*; for it may be a very weak or a very strong attachment; and our future reward will be in proportion to the strength and confirmed state of all our good habits and dispositions. For as great as is the diversity of human characters in this life, it is probable that the justice and wisdom of God will provide as great a diversity in their future retribution.

Besides the opinion that the great business of religion is the work of a moment, unavoidably subjects men to the grossest and most fatal delusions. Indeed, how can it be otherwise, when the thing to be attained passes wholly within a man's own breast, and is generally spoken of as a thing that is incapable of verbal description; the consequence of which must be, that persons of a warm imagination will presume, on any insignificant emotion, that they have experienced this happy change, and, valuing themselves upon it, will be apt to condemn and despise the rest of the world; while persons of a timid disposition will be tormented with doubts and despair. Not being content to judge of their hearts by
their

their lives, they will be perpetually seeking for something that no man in his sober senses ever imagined he had found.

All the representations which are given by our Saviour of the effect of the gospel, either in the hearts of individuals, or in the world at large (which correspond to one another) give us the idea of something that has a *gradual progress*, and no where of a sudden *instantaneous effect*. Thus we find it compared to *seed sown in the ground*, to a small quantity of *leaven*, to labouring in a *vineyard*, &c. all of which require a considerable time before a sensible effect is produced.

The doctrines of the gospel, though established by miracles, did not produce their effect on the minds of men by a *miraculous*, but by a *natural* power. Indeed external miracles would have been superfluous, upon this scheme; since God by internal miracles only might have converted the whole world. The gospel had that effect, and that only, which the ground on which it was sown admitted.

The

The new views which it opened to mankind induced most of those who were convinced that it was of God to come to a resolution to change their former conduct; but neither could their mere belief of christianity, nor their consequent resolution actually profit them, till it had time to bring forth the proper fruits of it, viz. *good works*; and a *change of character*. And when men did thus become christians, still the apostles never cease urging them, not only to act up to their profession, but to go on to perfection, comparing the christian course to a *race*, or other exercise, which required the greatest, and most unremitted exertion of all their powers.

If I be asked how this end is to be attained, or, in the language of the apostle, how we must *gird up the loins of our minds*, by what means is this lively and efficacious faith in the great practical principles of religion to be acquired. I answer, with St. Paul, that *faith comes by hearing*, supposing the consequence of hearing to be *believing*, and that believing operates as it ought to do. For it naturally

ly arises from giving sufficient attention of mind to the evidence on which our faith rests, and from frequent meditation on the objects of our faith ; and it cannot be produced by any other means.

A man, therefore, who means to be a christian in earnest, must, in a more especial manner, make himself acquainted with the books of *scripture*, and meditate upon their contents ; because these books, and these books alone, contain the proper materials for this excellent and necessary *discipline of the mind*, viz. the genuine view of the principles of christian faith, hope, and practice.

It is in these books only that we have an authentic account of the several dispensations of God to mankind. Here we have the original instructions of men sent of God, that is, of God himself ; respecting our conduct here, and our expectations hereafter. Here we meet with a distinct account of the lives of the prophets, and especially of the great prophet of God Jesus Christ, by whose miracles, death, and

and resurrection, all the promises of God are confirmed to us. In these books also we see, and are thereby made to *participate* of the genuine effects of religious principles on the hearts of men, in the piety and benevolence with which the sacred writers were apparently actuated; so that we enter into their excellent sentiments, as well as view their exemplary lives.

If, my brethren, we would consult our real improvement and happiness, as christians, we must be sensible that we cannot be too minutely acquainted with such particulars as these, or meditate too much upon them. No other exercise can be efficacious to form the heart and guide the life. We therefore find the greatest stress laid upon this employment in the books of scripture. Moses strongly inculcates it upon the Jews, Deut. vi, 6. *These words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart, and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up, &c.* The psalmist

psalmist repeatedly expresses the satisfaction which he had in his meditations upon the word of God, Ps. i, 2. *Blessed is the man that walketh not in the council of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in his law doth he meditate day and night.* See also, Ps. xix, 7, 8, 119, and 97. The apostle Paul likewise says of Timothy, 2 Tim. iii, 15, 16. *From a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All scripture given by inspiration of God, is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.*

These injunctions and exhortations certainly authorize us to conclude, that the frequent reading of the scriptures, the taking pleasure in them, and meditation upon their contents, are absolutely necessary in order to *gird up the loins of our minds*, and to form a truly christian character and conduct. The scriptures will not be neglected

lected by any person, but in consequence of his not apprehending himself to be sufficiently interested in their contents ; and without this apprehension it is impossible that truly religious principles can be implanted, and take root in the mind. Without this aid the temptations of the world will be too strong for a man. He will not be sufficiently upon his guard, so as to have the perfect command of himself, and not be surprised into improper sentiments and unworthy actions.

I mention a constant attention to the scriptures not as the only means of girding up the loins of our minds, and strengthening religious principles, but as that which is of eminent use to recommend and enforce the rest, such as prayer, an attendance upon public worship, and other means of religion. All these things have a natural connection, and they introduce and assist one another.

It may be said, that these things being only the *means* of religion, so much stress should not be laid upon them, but I would observe

observe that they are the *evidences* as well as the means of genuine religion; and also that no *end* can be gained without the use of the proper means. Besides, my immediate object at present is to insist chiefly upon those things which seem to be the most neglected, whatever be their relative importance; and if it was the error of the last age to lay too much stress upon the means of religion, it is evidently the error of many in the present age, at least of such as you whom I am now addressing, to pay too little attention to them; and if the former error produced a spurious kind of religion, the tendency of our present sentiments and conduct is to leave us no religion at all.

Having given this account of the importance of attending to the means of religion in general, and to the study of the scriptures in particular, as being of the most eminent use to generate and strengthen the great principle of christian faith, which is the foundation of all religion, I shall add a few observations concerning two other outward means of christian improvement,

provement, and which are also marks of our attention to the profession of christianity, viz. *public worship*, and *the Lord's supper*, the neglect of which is not the fault of this congregation in particular (though this is the only reason why I chuse to speak of them at all on this occasion) but of the present age in general.

I shall say nothing of the design, or use, either of public worship, or of the Lord's supper, because you will agree with me in your ideas of them ; but, my brethren, I wish to make you more sensible of the obligation you are under to act agreeably to your own convictions.

If one day in seven be appointed to be a season of rest from labour, and for serious recollection of mind, by that being who has made us capable both of labour and of reflection, let us conscientiously appropriate this, as well as every other portion of our time, to the use for which it was intended, and for which, we may therefore presume, it is really wanted ; and let us not, out of too great a dread of superstition (which ought

ought certainly to be guarded against, in this as well as in every thing else) pass into the contrary extreme, of a gross abuse of a divine ordinance, and a scandalous licentiousness of conduct.

Works of *necessity* and *mercy* are allowed to be a sufficient reason for setting aside the distinction of the Lord's day from the rest ; but that journey, for instance, cannot be said to be *necessary*, for which nothing but *convenience* can be pleaded ; neither can it be necessary to confine yourselves at home by taking a medicine on that day, when your health would not suffer by its being taken on the day before, or the day after. Also a cold, or other slight indisposition, is with a very ill grace pleaded as an excuse for absence from public worship, by those who are known to run much greater risks on other accounts. I wish it were merely a matter of *doubt*, whether, in many cases, the plea of necessity be justly alledged, and that it could be supposed that persons acted according to their *judgments*, though biassed by their inclinations. But alas, so generally, and so manifestly is

B business

business of a nature altogether foreign to the proper design of the Lord's day, thrown into it, by many persons, that it cannot be accounted for but by supposing it to be the effect of particular *design* and *contrivance*; which, being a wilful neglect of an acknowledged duty, certainly argues a want of the fear of God, and the absence of *religious principle*, properly so called.

Again, you will agree with me, my brethren, that our Lord Jesus Christ expressly commanded his disciples to commemorate his death (which was the greatest proof of his love to us) by a cheerful, but at the same time a solemn and serious rite, and that this memorial is to continue in his church till his second coming. This rite, therefore, is, in fact, one of the *standing proofs* of the truth of christianity; and consequently by joining in it, we not only acknowledge that truth, but bear our *testimony* to it, and, like the apostles themselves, are both the *disciples*, and in some measure, the *witnesses* of Christ, even to the end of time.

You

You are sensible that the command to join in the celebration of this institution extends to all who bear the christian name, and who are qualified to join in any other part of christian worship. To what then, my brethren, can your neglect of this ordinance be owing? It must be either some latent superstition, a criminal want of attention to the subject, or a more criminal indifference to the thing itself, arising from a want of respect to the authority that enjoins it. I wish it were even possible to suggest any other reason for your conduct.

The moral uses of the very few positive institutions in the christian religion are sufficiently obvious; but admitting that they were not so, it ought to suffice us, that they are enjoined by a *competent authority*; and the man who can knowingly transgress any one acknowledged command, though, to his apprehension, ever so unmeaning, is certainly destitute of respect to the authority by which it is enjoined, and of *a principle of obedience* in general; which, with respect to God, is, in the highest degree, criminal and dangerous.

You do not yourselves always give to a servant or a child the reasons of your commands; and yet you justly expect implicit obedience; and you would consider their *peremptory disobedience* as deserving of the severest punishment, though the thing itself should be ever so trifling.

As I cannot take my leave of you, my brethren, without expressing my earnest wishes that the several schemes I have formed, and endeavoured to carry into execution, for your benefit (and at the same time, that of dissenting congregations in general) may have their effect after my departure from you; and as a summary and connected view of them may possibly be of some use for that purpose, I shall, on this occasion, briefly remind you of them, and also inform you what I should have wished to have done farther, in pursuance of the same general design.

Perceiving, upon my first coming among you, that very few, in proportion to the number of the congregation, received *the Lord's supper*, I preached, and afterwards published,

published, *A Free Address* to you upon the subject, calculated, as I thought, to explain the nature of that institution, to answer the objections you might have to the celebration of it, especially those which remained from the ignorance and superstition of the dark ages of christianity, and to set the advantage and obligation of communicating in a clear and strong light. I have had the satisfaction to find that my endeavours in this respect have not been wholly without effect, though by no means so great as I wished, or indeed expected.

In this Address I gave my opinion very strongly, and I have repeated it upon several occasions since, against that service which is called the *preparation for the Lord's supper*, as altogether unscriptural, and superstitious; but I thought it, upon the whole, most expedient, to content myself with those declarations; and I did not chuse to give offence to any well-meaning persons by discontinuing that service. I meant, however, very soon, to have made the proposal, and should have been glad if you had cheerfully acceded to it.

Being sensible how much is incumbent upon *masters of families*, and how much is in their power, with respect to the care of their children and servants, in instructing them, attending to their morals, and keeping up the worship of God in their families, I preached and published a plain and earnest *Address* to you on this subject also, together with short *forms of prayer* for all the usual occasions of a family ; and I took what care I could to have it put into the hands of every master of a family among you. Whether this attempt has had any good effect, is known to God and your own consciences.

Observing that, in consequence of the happy tranquility which Dissenters have of late years enjoyed, but little attention has been given by them to the true principles of their dissent, which has necessarily been accompanied with a declension of just zeal for the interest, as the cause of religious liberty, I endeavoured to make the principles of our dissent better understood, and more especially to impress the minds of those who maintained them with a just sense of their importance and obligation,

in

in a *Free Address to Protestant Dissenters as such*. But as this address appeared to me to be less necessary in this congregation, and indeed in this part of the country, than in many other places, I took no particular care to make it known to you; and to avoid giving offence by the necessary freedom of it, I published it without my name.

The great profligacy of the present age being manifestly owing to a want of moral and religious principles, imbibed in early years, and it being impossible to inculcate these principles with sufficient force and effect by discourses from the pulpit, which are almost necessarily miscellaneous and unconnected, I formed, and have carried into execution a pretty extensive plan of *religious instruction*, advancing, in a regular progress, from infancy, to years of perfect manhood.

For this purpose I thought it convenient to divide the younger part of my hearers into three classes. The first consisted of *children*, for whose use I printed a short

and very plain *catechism*, containing such a view of the principles of religion, as I think the youngest children, that have attained to the use of speech, may be made to understand. The second consisted of young persons more advanced in years, for whom I drew up another catechism, consisting of a set of *questions* only, peculiarly calculated, as I think, to bring them very early, and pretty thoroughly acquainted with *the scriptures*, the genuine source of all religious knowledge.

The third class consisted of *young men*, from the age of sixteen or eighteen, to about thirty, for whose use I composed a set of *lectures*, which I delivered in the way of conversation, in which I endeavoured to demonstrate to them in a regular manner, the principles of *natural religion*, the *evidences*, and the *doctrines of revelation*, and which I concluded with a view of *the corruptions of christianity*, historically deduced. By this means, I am satisfied, from the trial that I have now made of it, that young persons may most easily be brought to understand their religion, as Christians, Protestants, and Dissenters.

The peculiar advantages of this mode of instruction, and a more distinct account of the nature of it, I explained in an *Essay on the best method of communicating religious knowledge to the members of christian societies*. Part of this course of lectures I have already published, under the title of *Institutes of natural and revealed religion*, and I intend, God willing, to publish the remainder in due time.

In part, to avoid obvious inconveniences, and partly for want of a room sufficiently large for the purpose, I confined these lectures, for the first time of reading them, to *young men*; but I should have been glad, if, at the second time of reading them, I could have contrived to instruct the *young women*, either at the same time, or separately.

It is with great satisfaction that I can say, with respect to most of the young men of this congregation, that they have given due attendance on these lectures; and I flatter myself that by the attention which they gave to them when they were delivered,
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and which I hope they will still continue to give to them when they are printed, they will find their time and pains not ill bestowed.

With respect to children of the first class, I must own that I had not all the encouragement that I wished, and still less with respect to the second; owing, perhaps, to the parents not sufficiently entering into the nature of a thing so new to them as this was. For I am unwilling to suppose that they were averse to taking the pains, which they must, at least at the first, have necessarily done, to prepare their children for this kind of exercise.

It is acknowledged by all, that the general plan and *discipline* of our societies has deviated very far indeed from that of the primitive churches, which consisted of persons whose object it was to *watch over and edify one another*, and especially that a very unequal part of the burden is now thrown upon the minister; since he is generally so situated, that he cannot, with the least probability of success, interpose
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his advice or admonition where it may be most wanted. I therefore wrote and published an *Address* to you, and other christian societies, upon that subject, proposing what appeared to me a better constitution of a christian church, by means of which the original and proper ends of christian societies might be more effectually answered.

I am afraid we are gone too far from the primitive institutions of christianity to expect a revival of them in this age ; but I hope that the idea I then endeavoured to give you of the obligation that naturally lies upon every member of a christian society, who, on any account whatever, has influence in it (without any formal nomination to an office) to contribute all that may be in his power to the real benefit of it, by instruction, reproof, or any other way, will not be wholly without effect ; and that you will in general be more attentive to the important christian duty of *provoking to love and to good works, exhorting one another daily while it is called to day, lest any be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.*

Lastly

Lastly perceiving in this neighbourhood, and, in some measure, among yourselves, the progress of what appears to me to be a spurious and mischievous set of notions in religion, inspiring very unworthy ideas of the divine being, and the maxims of his government, which cannot but have an unfavourable effect upon the disposition of men's minds, and consequently upon their conduct in life, I published, in the cheapest form that I could, and, in order to give as little offence as possible, without my name, a serious *Appeal* to the professors of christianity upon the subject. This, and other small pieces, written in pursuance of the same design, I have had the satisfaction to find, have been the instrument, in the hands of divine providence, of enlightening the minds of many in the knowledge of what I believe to be *his truth*, and I hope they will still continue to produce the same effect.

I was the more willing to publish some thing of this kind, as it has always been my opinion, and my practice has been agreeable to it, to keep all subjects of religious

gious controversy, as much as possible, out of the pulpit ; and yet it was to be wished, that persons of plain understandings, who were disposed to read and inquire for themselves, might have an opportunity of seeing the foundation, in reason and the scriptures, of those doctrines, which alone can render the divine being the object of filial reverence, love, and confidence ; and likewise be able to answer those who alledge detached passages of scripture, in favour of long established corruptions, passages often ill translated, but more often wretchedly interpreted.

Allow me to say without offence to any who may be otherwise minded, if any such should be present, that *speculative principles*, especially those which relate to the nature, character, and moral government of God, are by no means a matter of indifference with respect to *practice* ; and therefore that great care ought to be taken to form just ideas of these subjects.

If the divine being be considered as capable of punishing men for a crime which they did
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not commit, of sentencing some to everlasting happiness, and others to everlasting misery, from mere arbitrary will; and of shewing no mercy to any of his offending, though truly penitent creatures (whom, for wise ends, he made imperfect) till a full satisfaction was made to his infinite justice (even so far as to take it of the innocent, if the guilty were not able to pay) which is in fact to have no proper principle of mercy or forgiveness at all, it is not in human nature to look up to him with reverence, love, or confidence.

Also the doctrine of the *divine unity* is a subject of practical, as well as of speculative consideration, and indeed for no other reason could so much stress be laid upon it in the books of the Old and New Testament, in which we are required *to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, soul, strength, and mind*. This certainly requires that all our affections center in *one* great object; but *three persons* are *three objects*, which will necessarily be considered in different lights, having different *attributes*, as well as different *names*. For the difference

difference between *persons* and *beings* is merely verbal, and not real. It is even acknowledged that the difference is not comprehensible by us, and therefore with respect to us, and our sentiments and feelings, it must be the same as if there was no difference at all; and consequently the worship of three different persons must necessarily be the worship of three different gods.

But, my brethren, if these things be of a practical nature, see that you make a practical use of them, by giving sufficient attention to them, as I explained in the first part of this discourse, and let them have their natural influence upon your minds; and also see that you do not disgrace and discredit a rational faith by an unworthy conduct. Better had it been for you to have believed in three, or three hundred gods, and those of wood and stone, than to believe in the *one only living and true God*, and at the same time live as without him in the world, intirely thoughtless of his being, character, and government, as if you were not accountable to him

him for your conduct. Infinitely better were it for you to believe whatever the most stupid of mankind have believed concerning God, than disregard his laws, profane his name, or neglect his worship.

Better were it for you to have believed in a revengeful implacable object of worship, than to believe in a God truly merciful and gracious, who freely, and *for his goodness sake* only, forgives all the sincerely penitent, and has sent his son to live and die, in order to bring men to repentance, and at the same time not to be solicitous to become the proper objects of his mercy, or not to imitate such an amiable pattern, and *be merciful as your father who is in heaven is merciful*; freely, and without any satisfaction, forgiving, as you yourselves hope to be forgiven. In short, better were it for you to believe all the absurdities of the church of Rome, than not to add purity of heart and life to purity of doctrine and worship.

Gross ignorance and superstition still prevail among the generality of professing christians,

christians, especially the unlearned ; and it would be unreasonable to expect that opinions which have prevailed, and which have been held sacred by almost the whole christian world, for many ages (in which our excellent religion was suffered, by the unsearchable wisdom of God, to lie under a cloud) should not retain their influence with some more *ingenuous minds*, and even that some degree of *learning* and *ability* should be employed in their defence. This is the case with respect to the grossest absurdities of popery, which, it cannot be denied, have had, and probably still have, their defenders among the most learned and the best of mankind.

It is evident, however, and the friends of christianity will rejoice in the prospect of it, that the truth is making its way by degrees, and in a manner that promises its general prevalence, viz. with men of real learning, and especially those men of letters who give most of their time to the study of the scriptures ; and also with other persons of good sense and good dispositions, who are capable of inquiring

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and thinking for themselves; and the number of these persons is increasing every day.

A very remarkable and happy change has, in the course of divine providence, been gradually brought about among yourselves in this respect, in the space of a century, which period of time is now elapsed since the erection of the building in which we are now assembled. Indeed, the whole of the change has taken place in the memory of very many of you who are now present. I shall think myself happy if I have been, in any respect, the means, in the hands of God, of advancing this great work of reformation among you; but much more so, if, together with the principles of sound knowledge, I have, in any measure, successfully inculcated what is still more needful, that *integrity of heart and life*, that genuine love of God and of mankind, without which all knowledge is but as *sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal*.

The times of our ancestors were times of laudable zeal, but of very limited knowledge.

ledge. It were pity if an increase of knowledge should be attended with a decrease of zeal. You cannot be sufficiently thankful to God for bringing you *out of darkness into his marvellous light*; but see that you walk worthy of that light, and that you bring no disgrace upon rational christianity by your unworthy conduct. In the present state of human nature it cannot be expected but that such *offences* as these will come, but *wo unto them by whom they come*.

I trust, my brethren, that you do not need any exhortation to continue stedfast in your principles as *Dissenters*, and upon this subject I have nothing to add to what I have said in my *Address to Protestant Dissenters as such*. I shall only remind you at present, that to be a Dissenter, in the present state of things, in this country, is to bear our testimony against the authority and imposition of men in matters of religion, and also against the many abuses and corruptions in christian doctrine, discipline, and worship, which had their source in the antichristian church of Rome, and which yet remain in our established church.

A cause like this wants not the countenance of *numbers*, or of *wealth*, to make it respectable. It is true, my brethren, our profession excludes us from many of the honours and emoluments of this world, and even subjects us to many grievous pains and penalties, whenever the malice of our enemies shall break through the restraints of humanity and natural justice, by taking advantage of several *laws*, which are as disgraceful to our country and free constitution, as they are injurious to us. But I trust that, considering the nature of our profession, and our expectations as *christians*, we shall not be surpris'd, or discouraged by this circumstance, as if some *strange*, and extraordinary *thing* had *happened to us* ; when our master himself, *not being of the world*, was *hated by the world*, and his religion was from the very beginning a *sect* that was every where *spoken against*.

In fact, what you and I, my brethren, call genuine christianity, has hardly ever been so much as tolerated by the laws of any christian country, at least in Europe,
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and what is called christendom. I trust, however, from a view of the present face of things, compared with the writings of the prophets (which were certainly intended to apprize us of very important events respecting the christian church) that the time is fast approaching, when an end will be put to all antichristian tyranny, and when *the kingdoms of the world will become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ.*

All who are interested in the support of these *anticristian establishments*, which usurp an undue authority over the consciences of men, and whose wealth and power are advanced by them, are at this very time in a state of general consternation, both at home and abroad; seeing their principles and maxims universally decried, and their unjust claims assailed from a great variety of quarters, so that *their kingdom is now full of darkness, and they are gnawing their tongues for pain, but without repenting of their deeds*, Rev. xvi. 10. And we are authorized, my brethren, by the spirit which foretold both this corruption of christianity, and the restoration of it from
this

this deplorably corrupted state, to enjoy their confusion and distress ; and, together with the powers of heaven, and the holy apostles and prophets, to rejoice at the fall of this mystical Babylon, since it is God that avengeth us of her. Rev. xviii. 20.

But who shall abide this day of our Lord's coming, to plead his cause in the world ; when those princes and states which would not have him to reign over them, and who have persecuted and oppressed his faithful witnesses, shall be broken in pieces like a potter's vessel.

THE CONCLUSION.

I think myself happy, my brethren, and I shall reflect upon it with pleasure as long as I am capable of reflection, that, as our connection has subsisted with perfect harmony, it is dissolved with mutual gratitude and esteem. I am conscious, indeed, of many imperfections, and of some neglects in the discharge of my duty, but you have had the candour to overlook them. I would observe, however, that it is not by
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the opinion which we may entertain of each other that we must stand or fall, at the tribunal of the *great shepherd and bishop of souls*, Christ Jesus. He, being endued by God with a perfect knowledge of our characters (though, having a fellow feeling of our infirmities, he will be disposed to make all reasonable allowances for us) may acquit where we condemn, and condemn where we acquit. To this decisive judgment let us have respect. Happy will it be for us if I have so preached, and you so heard, that we need *not be ashamed before him at his coming*.

It is another ground of satisfaction to me, that I leave the congregation in so good a state, in a variety of respects, especially so harmonious in your general sentiments and views, on which account you cannot fail to appear highly respectable wherever the Dissenting interest is known; and you have given a very important proof of your prudence and judgment, as well as of your harmony, in the perfect unanimity with which you have acted in the choice of my successor; a choice in which I sincerely

cerely concur, and on which I congratulate you. May you continue to be a pattern to other congregations, in this and in every thing else in which a christian society can be worthy of imitation, and may you reap the proper and happy fruits of what has been so truly praise worthy in your dispositions and conduct.

And now, brethren, in the words of the apostle Paul, Acts xx, 32, I commend you to God, and the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among them who are sanctified. To Him who is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God, our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen !



THE END.

To the young men, who attended the
lecture at Mill-hill chapel

My young fr.^{ds}

Palmer 14th June 1773

I cannot express to you the
satisfaction, I rec^d. from your letter & unex-
pected present. Valuable as it is in itself, I
shall value it much more, as a memorial
of your esteem; & more still, as an evidence
of the favourable acceptance, w^{ch} my endea-
vours for your improvement in religious
knowledge have met with from you, & there-
fore, I trust, of the benefit you have rec^d.
from them.

Be assured that I shall ever retain
a most grateful remembrance of every instance
of friendship, w^{ch} I have rec^d. from the congre-
gation, & particularly this of yours.

It is the most earnest wish of my
heart, that by a wise & steady conduct, aris-
ing from just principles & views, a conduct
w^{ch} is perfectly consistent with the highest
enjoyment of life, & without w^{ch} indeed, life
cannot be enjoyed with any real satisfac-
tion, you may do honour to yourselves, your
fr.^{ds}

for^{ds} & country here; & what is of still
more importance, secure an happy immor-
tality hereafter.

Hoping, that the affection & respects
you have had for me, will be transferred
to my worthy successor, I remain,
yr. affectionate for^{dr}
& wellwisher.

A copy from the
original - J. Ralph

J. Priestley